

Happy and Healthy:

Your pet reptile and you



There are many health benefits to pets but any animal can also carry germs that can make people sick. Luckily, there are simple things you can do to keep you and your family healthy.

Pet reptiles, such as lizards, snakes, or turtles, can carry germs in their digestive system (from the mouth to the stomach to the intestines) and shed germs in their feces (droppings). Germs, such as *Salmonella*, may be present on the skin or in the droppings of pet reptiles, even if the animal appears to be healthy. If these germs are accidentally eaten, when a person touches the droppings (or the animal) and later touches his or her mouth, or prepares food without washing his or her hands first, the person may become ill. Children are especially at risk for becoming infected because they are more likely to put their hands in their mouths after handling a pet.



Salmonella in humans can cause an upset stomach, cramps, diarrhea, fever, nausea, and vomiting. In rare cases, the bacteria can get into the blood and become life-threatening. Anyone can become ill from these germs, but young children, the elderly, pregnant women, and people with weakened immune systems may develop more serious illness.



Did you know...?

In 1970 it became illegal to sell turtles smaller than 4 inches long. Although they were cute and hard to resist as pets, many children were getting sick with salmonella because they could fit these turtles in their mouths!

And...

There are certain rare species of reptiles and a few dangerous snakes, including all poisonous ones, that are not allowed to be kept as pets in Massachusetts.

Here are a few simple things that can make having a pet reptile safe and fun:

- **Always wash your hands with soap and water immediately after handling pet reptiles, their cage, food dishes or toys, or their droppings;** use waterless alcohol-based gels or hand rubs when soap is not available.
- Clean reptile cages regularly and remove soiled items from the cage between cleanings.
- Clean the cage in a well-ventilated area or outside. Do not clean it in the kitchen sink or anywhere else food is stored or handled.
- Do not kiss pet reptiles or hold them close to your face.
- Have your pet seen regularly by your veterinarian and contact your veterinarian if your pet reptile shows signs of illness between visits.
- Do not allow pet reptiles to come into contact with wild reptiles or their droppings.
- A reptile is not an appropriate pet for every home. Because pregnant women, persons with weakened immune systems, the elderly and young children (less than 5 years old) are at higher risk for more serious illness, reptiles should only be handled and cared for by an adult who is not pregnant and/or living with a weakened immune system.



For more information about handling pets safely, see:

- The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention website, “Healthy Pets Healthy People” at <http://www.cdc.gov/healthypets/index.htm>.
- The Massachusetts Department of Public Health website at <http://www.mass.gov/dph/cdc/epii/epi.htm#pet> or call the Division of Epidemiology and Immunization at 617-983-6800 or toll free at 1-888-658-2850.
- Or call your veterinarian.

